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SUBJECT: LEBANON: OPPOSITION RHETORIC AGAINST SLEIMAN
CANDIDACY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
) .

SUMMARY

1. (C) Many in the governing March 14 coalition thought that their agreeing to elect Michel Sleiman as president would lead to a solution to the impasse over the presidency, since it was assumed Sleiman had the support of the March 8-Aoun opposition. Instead, the Hizballah-led opposition has so far dragged its collective feet, making it difficult to elect Sleiman by insisting on a package of other conditions before doing so. The opposition continues to say publicly it supports Sleiman, but has shown no flexibility on conditions such as a demand for a blocking third of the seats in a new national unity cabinet. March 14's refusal even to discuss other issues before electing Sleiman has provoked charges of obstructionism from the opposition. Although March 14's endorsement of Sleiman took the March 8-Aoun opposition by surprise, it is now digging in its heels, implying that Sleiman has become March 14's candidate, and is therefore unacceptable to the opposition. End summary.

NO SOLUTION WITHOUT AOUN AND HIZBALLAH

2. (C) When the pro-government March 14 leadership agreed in a November 27 meeting to accept LAF Commander Michel Sleiman as president, there was a widespread belief in its ranks that they were accepting a candidate that most of the political opposition, and the opposition's Syrian backers, wanted -- or would at least not be able to refuse. Most in March 14 thought it likely that Hizballah and Amal would agree to elect Sleiman right away but there was the question as to whether their ally, Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, would renounce his own fervent desire to become president and also back Sleiman. If he did, the thought went, the two sides would proceed to the election of Sleiman. A few days after Sleiman's name emerged, on November 29, Aoun gave up his bid for the presidency in a press conference with pro-Hizballah al-Manar TV and expressed his support for Sleiman. But he tied the election of Sleiman to a set of conditions he had laid out on November 22, the day before ex-President Lahoud left office. His reference to those conditions gave the first indication of the principal demand that the opposition has used since then to block Sleiman's election: a demand for the distribution of seats in the new cabinet in proportion to the 55/45 percent distribution between the majority and the opposition in the parliament. This would give the opposition veto power to block major

government decisions and topple the cabinet at will via resignations.

¶3. (C) Despite Aoun's statement, there also were positive signals from the opposition at that stage about going ahead with Sleiman. Speaker Nabih Berri announced the first week of December that a "constitutional solution" was already in the works, since electing Sleiman would require a change in the constitutional ban against a senior government employee becoming president. MP Michel Murr, who is a member of Aoun's bloc but often differs with him, reported to Polstaff on December 3 that Berri told him that Aoun and Hizballah would not be able to obstruct a French, American, Saudi, Egyptian, and European effort to make Sleiman president. Hizballah, for its part, publicly supported Aoun, consistent with their long-held position that the opposition's position on who would fill the Christian presidency was up to Aoun; that Hizballah would only back Aoun or a candidate of his choice.

¶4. (C) Then Berri laid down some of his own conditions for electing Sleiman, including assurances from Saad Hariri that while Hariri would be the next prime minister, the composition of the next 30-member cabinet would be 11 ministers from March 8 and 19 ministers from March 14, which would still give the opposition a blocking minority. March 14 figures believe Berri was conveying Syria's position.

¶5. (C) Signs that the opposition would not support Sleiman unconditionally increased. Meetings between Berri and Hariri (facilitated by French FM Kouchner) during the first week of December 2007 were inconclusive. Meanwhile, negative comments about Sleiman started to appear in the pro-opposition press. There were stories that March 14 had settled for Sleiman because the U.S. had approved him. It was

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as if in the eyes of the opposition Sleiman, having been nominated by the majority, had somehow become "their man" and could no longer be trusted.

¶6. (C) In a December 14 speech, Hizballah Deputy SYG Sheikh Naim Qassim reiterated the opposition's demand for a cabinet with 45 percent opposition ministers, derided the Siniora government performance since the July 2006 war and recommended March 14 should discuss an "integrated package" with Aoun. March 14, for its part, charged Hizballah was using Aoun as a front, to cover for Syria's intent to torpedo Sleiman's candidacy.

A/S WELCH VISIT EXACERBATES OPPOSITION RHETORIC

¶7. (C) A/S Welch's mid-December visits, the second with DAPNSA Abrams, provoked a flurry of opposition media attacks. Pro-Hizballah al-Manar TV stated Welch's visit to Beirut had three aims: first, to create a inter-Christian rift, since he did not meet with Aoun; second, to bring together the "weak" pro-government team and third, to exert pressure on March 14 to elect a president before reaching a package of understandings with the opposition. Opposition MPs Husayn al-Hajj Hassan and Wi'am Wahhab warned that Welch had come to press March 14 to hold a half-plus-one (simple majority) vote to push through Sleiman's election. The opposition exploited A/S Welch's visits as evidence that the U.S., having lost patience with French attempts to reach a solution, had decided to take matters into its own hands and direct Lebanon's political future according to wider U.S. regional interests.

¶8. (C) On December 17 Aoun announced on al-Manar that he was the opposition's "sole negotiator until further notice." Many in March 14 told the Embassy that designating Aoun was a sign that the opposition did not truly want to negotiate seriously, and there have been no March 14 contacts with Aoun.

MARCH 14 RESPONDS, OPPOSITION REACTS

¶9. (C) On December 27, after Berri's tenth postponement of a parliamentary election session, the Siniora cabinet submitted a petition to amend Article 49 of the constitution in order to allow Sleiman's election. In this action, the cabinet was acting both as the representative of the government and with the presidential powers it acquired when Lahoud resigned. Hizballah immediately accused the government of violating the constitution and usurping presidential powers, while Berri-bloc MP Ali Bazzi reiterated that Berri would reject the draft law from the "unconstitutional" government, adding that the move would increase complications rather than lead to a solution to the political deadlock. Hizballah Deputy SYG Qassim's December 27 remarks to al-Manar repeated all previous charges against the March 14 position, warning the pro-government team to stop persisting in its action to elect Sleiman without other conditions. He added, in a veiled threat, that the opposition would not continue to sit idly by.

¶10. (C) In a January 2 speech, Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah alleged the U.S. was obstructing a solution to the crisis that the opposition and ruling blocs were on the verge of reaching until the visits of Welch and Abrams. Nasrallah further claimed that the U.S. was seeking to create a pro-American authority in Lebanon--one that would do its bidding and fulfill its goals in Lebanon and the region. He expressed support for electing Sleiman.

COMMENT

¶11. The March 8-Aoun opposition refusal to proceed with the election of Sleiman in December 2007 was initially a surprise. Since then, the opposition has been consistent in its resistance and its position that March 14 must agree to give it a blocking third of the cabinet seats before it will agree to the election of Sleiman. The Arab League communique of 1/5 changes the story slightly, in that the March 8-Aoun opposition now pretends to be ready to step back from its blocking third -- but only if the March 14 alliance agrees to give up its majority and accept a cabinet with equal representation by March 14, March 8, and Michel Sleiman. This, it is safe to predict, March 14 will not do, leaving

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March 8-Aoun forces to stick with their demand for a blocking third as the condition for electing someone as president long thought to have come from their ranks. END COMMENT.

FELTMAN